WHY IS HARRY SO COMPELLING? A TEACHER TRAINER PERSPECTIVE

What is it that grabs kids and adults alike as they read and discuss *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*? Is it that *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* is a compelling story? Is it that the ideas as so new and startling that they demand examination? Is it the clever graphic design of the text which pulls the reader into the novel? Surprisingly, it is none of the above.

Yes the story is interesting, but not compelling. The ideas are surely important but not new or startling. The design of the material is quite dull. Yet each time I teach a group of children or conduct a teacher training workshop, we are grabbed by something, discussion is lively and we are moved sometimes quite strongly by the text.

What is compelling it seems is the combination of a story of ideas coupled with a forum for discussing those ideas. The "magic" when it happens, and it usually does happen, is based on a combination of important ideas (important to young and old, teacher and student), a well written narrative with believable characters and a gradual introduction of new information, new skills and new challenges.

Perhaps what is most effective is the subtle but strong invitation we get from the text, the narrative, to think . . . and to think aloud. Harry is a superb model. He is confident, yet tentative. He is slow and persistent. And most of all he is inclusive in this search for understanding, in his exploration of points of view and in his relationship with others. No one escapes Harry as he asks questions, suggests ways to think about something and explore possible solutions. Not that Harry is a perfect kid, he could be overbearing to some. Mostly, Harry creates an atmosphere in which he can think aloud and in which we are invited to think along with him.

While there are many other strengths of this work, the permission given to students, you and old, to think for ourselves and to do so in a public manner is, I think, the most compelling element of the Harry novel. It is also one of the points which make to difficult to explain to those who have not experienced it. To experience it, is to take up the invitation to think out loud in a group.

Harry creates a community of scholars in his world and helps us to create one in our world. A community of scholars is a complex phenomena, but its most important element, in that without it one can not begin the process of developing such a community, is to talk aloud about some issues of common importance. This then is the second accomplishment of *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*. Harry talk about issues which many people share and which are amenable to communal inquiry. A part of what makes these ideas assessable to us is their concrete nature (perhaps concrete is not the correct word - connected comes closer). For Harry it is the school that is his and our connection. No matter how "philosophical" the children's conversation gets, it is always grounded in some specific place and context.

Children and adults are not put off by abstract thinking and/or incapable of abstract thinking, they are put off and/or incapable of disconnected thinking. Harry always keeps us connected. Harry's invitation to think aloud and to think in a connected way are a great achievement. It is on this achievement that everything else is built.

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